RETHINKING RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES: PUNK ETHNOGRAPHY AS A FUTURES FORMING PRACTICE

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Crisis: From Problem to Opportunity

One can't help but wonder if life is not simply lived in a state of permanent crisis. For years now we have been hearing about the mental health crisis, environmental crisis, financial crisis, political crisis, climate crisis and more recently, the global health crisis. Indeed, Robert Holton wrote more than thirty years ago that "in the contemporary world we are told that 'crisis' threatens us on all sides"[1]. In education this goes back even further, with Hannah Arendt's famous essay on *The Crisis in Education* dating back to 1954.

Yet, there is good reason to not capitulate to a kind of crisis malaise or to equate 'crisis' with 'problem'. Gert Biesta reminds us about the original meaning of the word 'crisis', which "is not a state of chaos, but a critical moment or turning point that calls for consideration and judgement (in Greek: 'krinein')"[2]. It is thus possible to see crisis as an

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[1] Robert Holton, "The Idea of Crisis in Modern Society," *The British Journal of Sociology, 38*(4) (1987): 502, doi:10.2307/590914.
[2] Gert Biesta, "Have We Been Paying Attention? Educational Anaesthetics in a Time of Crises," *Educational Philosophy and*

opportunity to interrupt the status quo of our personal and professional lives, to question what is happening, how we ended up here, and consider what kind of responses can be made.

'What Works' Doesn't Work

This view led me to pursue doctoral studies in the field of education as a 'crisis response' whereby I am exploring how approaches to research methods in education can be broadened and diversified. What kind of practices can researchers, together with practitioners, develop that allow for creating opportunities to imagine alternative futures, starting from actions in the present?

The prevalent discourse in education is generally based on the assumption that our world can be "governed by numbers"[3], whereby all of life is reduced into commoditized

[3] Martin Mills, "Educational research that has an impact: 'Be realistic, demand the impossible'," *Australian Educational Researcher* 45 (2018): 573.

units of measurements[4]. This 'what works'[5] logic dominates discourses and practices within education at education policy level, but also in the practice of schools and in education research[6]. Work is often mirroring and articulating[7] the state of affairs and its concomitant crises rather than creating appropriate responses centred around questions about human flourishing and how to live responsibly in an increasingly complex world. I suggest that, instead of limiting ourselves to critique or problem-solving, we need to explore possibilities of developing not only alternative ways of doing education (research and practice), but alternative ways of living and being.

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[4] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the demos: neoliberalism's stealth revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015).

[5] Gert Biesta, *Educational research : An unorthodox introduction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

[6] Gert Biesta, *Educational research : An unorthodox introduction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).
Michael A. Peters and John Freeman-Moir, *Edutopias. Bold Visions in Education Research* (Münster: Sense, 2006).

[7] Kenneth J. Gergen, "From Mirroring to World-Making: Research as Future Forming," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 45 (2015): 287-310.

From Methodology to Futures Forming Practice

When I started conducting fieldwork in my case study school, I entered as a researcher to work with a group of practitioners (or 'participants'). However, quickly these designations became permeable and we were infiltrating each other's roles and spaces in a constructive and organic manner. I had no intention of setting a rigid research agenda nor of trying to solve a problem. Instead there was a growing commitment amongst a small group of people, to collaborate and to turn ideas into action. Equally, there was a willingness to reflect on the role of education and how we could step back from the global education discourse and work collaboratively towards change (in education) starting from the present. It was in those moments that the ethnographic techniques I was applying (observations, interviews, making fieldnotes, journaling) were no longer merely methodological techniques, but were becoming 'shaping practices'. The ethnographic work evolved from methodology to practice, thereby (re)negotiating roles and relationships, and ultimately, to actions that entailed visions of alternative futures.

Punk Ethnography: The Nexus between Punk and Anarchy

Out of these fieldwork experiences emerged punk ethnography, an attempt to offer a conceptual framework as well as a practical toolkit for researchers and practitioners to create alternative futures together, starting from actions in the present. It is a practice that applies elements of the punk ethos and anarchist philosophy and that makes use of ethnographic strategies, offering guidelines to bring researchers and practitioners together. Punk ethnography is underpinned by values of relationality, interconnectedness and solidarity and deliberately wishes to offer an alternative to the more neoliberal, evidence-based, and 'what works' approaches to research and the often large gap between research and practice.

Punk and anarchy, despite being two different matters, can be complementary. Broadly speaking, punk emphasises resistance, creativity and a Do It Yourself (DIY) attitude. Shukaitis adds that punk is committed to "bringing

together and enacting other ways to live and be together in the world; ways not based on the values of capitalism or other forms of social domination and exclusion"[8]. Anarchy, on the other hand, emphasises non-coercive political and social organisational structures. An anarchist approach, according to Suissa, "does not simply concern 'blueprints for single institutions', but sees in the very act of restructuring human relationships within such institutions (the school, the workplace), a creative act of engaging with the restructuring of society as a whole"[9].

Punk provides an ethos, or more so, an attitude and state of mind that guides a futures forming practice that is driven by the idea that education can be a field of social change[10]. Anarchist philosophy adds a non-coercive political and organisational dimension to this attitude. Despite their Western origin, punk and anarchist

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[8] Stevphen Shukaitis, "Growing up clichéd," in *Punkademics: The basement show in the ivory tower,* ed Zack Furness (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2012), 125-129.
[9] Judith Suissa, *Anarchism and Education: a philosophical perspective*, (UK: Routledge, 2006).
[10] Judith Suissa, *Anarchism and Education: a philosophical perspective*, (UK: Routledge, 2006).

perspectives can serve small communities of researchers and practitioners across cultural contexts.

The Three Practical Components of Punk Ethnography

The punk ethnographic practice is organised around three components that work simultaneously: the creation of an anarcho-syndicate, the punk ethos, and a postdisciplinary approach.

The Creation of an Anarcho-Syndicate

The first component is structured around the creation of an anarcho-syndicate, an organisational concept borrowed from the anarchist school of thought that emerged from the labour movement in the early 1900s[11]. An anarcho-syndicate has two important features that allow for direct action: small by intention and self-governance, features that

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[11] Noam Chomsky, "The relevance of anarcho-syndicalism," accessed June, 28, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_x0Y3FqkEI.

can also be found in Dewey's approach to democracy as participatory and decentralized[12]. These features are opposed to the structure and purpose of large and often hierarchical bureaucracies. Educational institutions and the work they do are often governed by larger - local, national or transnational - bureaucratic organizations. It can be hard for schools and universities to escape these bureaucracies. Yet the anarcho-syndicate offers a structure that can create a space to explore alternatives and allow for bottom-up initiatives and different dynamics to emerge. It is one possible way to organise small groups of people in an inclusive, non-coercive, participatory manner.

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[12] Wayne Price, "Anarchism and the philosophy of pragmatism", accessed September, 14, 2021, https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/wayne-price-anarchism-and-the-philosophy-of-pragmatism.

The Punk Ethos

The specific elements of the punk ethos I am drawing on are bold inventiveness and the DIY approach. The first elements, inventiveness and boldness, are expressed in the boundary-crossing work, the infiltrations that researchers and practitioners are concerned with as part of punk ethnography. We are at times performer; at times audience. Researchers and practitioners thus need to be comfortable with changes of state and discordant role play. We need to be willing to acknowledge our own limitations and despite these, be bold and inventive. We should be willing to work collaboratively, despite the presence of larger bureaucracies. The second element of the punk ethos is built around the DIY ethos. Punk can create what Moore and Roberts describe as a "mobilising structure"[13], a space for action and creation rather than the often paralysing bureaucratic structures.

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[13] Ryan Moore and Michael Roberts, "Do-It-Yourself Mobilization: Punk and Social Movements," *Mobilization* 14 (2009): 275.

Postdisciplinary Approach

Postdisciplinarity, according to Sayer, is not just about going beyond disciplinary boundaries, but implies "a conception of human flourishing"[14]. In other words, punk ethnography is asking us to unlearn and refuse to be limited by the restrictions of our professional fields and disciplines. What I consider a major challenge is the neoliberal academic climate of 'publish or perish' whereby academics are forced to publish in high stakes, highly specialized journals, usually behind paywalls. Research therefore often remains in the abstract realms of academe and does not reach practitioners, who in turn are not in a position where they can easily contribute to, question or critique research. Researchers (as well as practitioners) thus need to be willing to cross boundaries. Beer refers to the punk attitude as one of "breaking with conventions and to move into unfamiliar

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[14] Andrew Sayer, *Why Things Matter to People: Social science, Values and Ethical Life*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 245.

analytical territory"[15] for matters that we consider to be worthwhile and important.

Quite a Crowd Indeed

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari opened their book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* with the following phrase: "The two of us wrote Anti-Oedipus together. Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd"[16]. The 'severals' of me (the early-career researcher and scholar, the philosopher, the inquirer, the practitioner, the teacher, the student...) are in constant conversation with practitioners, scholars, colleagues... Moreover, there is you, the reader, who brings additional perspectives, speculations and judgements when interpreting and applying punk ethnography, which makes it a living, contingent and ever evolving practice. Together with our communities and through these engagements, we

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[15] David Beer, *Punk sociology*, (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 59.
[16] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), 3.

are capable of imagining alternative futures in the present.

It is quite a crowd indeed.

More information on www.punkethnography.org.

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